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THE BIBLICAL WORLD

VOLUME XXVII

APRIL, 1906

NUMBER 4

Editorial

LEGITIMATE AGNOSTICISM

The article by Mr. Merrill on "How Shall We Teach the Infancy Narratives to Our Children?" published in a recent issue of the *Biblical World*, has called forth in public print and private letter certain criticisms which involve the larger question of which the one discussed by our contributor is but one phase. When the teacher is in doubt, what then?

We not infrequently meet in these days with a demand for positiveness in teaching that implies that for the Christian teacher there is no middle ground between firm belief and positive denial. One must believe that there were two Isaiahs, or that there was but one; that Paul wrote the pastoral epistles, or that he did not; that John is the sole author of the fourth gospel, or that he was not. But this demand is manifestly unreasonable. Unless our teachers are able to claim not only infallibility but omniscience on every subject that comes within the sphere of their study and teaching, it must often be necessary for them to say: "On this point I can neither affirm nor deny; I do not know." Certainty, in the sense of confidence based upon knowledge, is eminently desirable; but it is not always possible. It will be at once admitted that not every teacher can know in what year Jesus was born, how long his ministry continued, when the apostle Paul was converted, and in what year he died. But these questions, it will be said, are relatively unimportant. Certainty is of little consequence. Is it then always easier to be sure on important matters than on unimportant ones?

Or is it wiser to assume knowledge and speak with confidence on weighty matters than on trivial ones? Doubtless it is more important not unnecessarily to suggest doubt on vital matters than on those that are not so. But does it follow that when one is really in doubt he should pretend to a confidence he does not really possess, or that the honest student can always escape from his dilemma by *knowing* what the facts are? In short, since the teacher cannot be omniscient, and, though he may be reticent, must not be dishonest, when the teacher is in doubt, what then?

Of course, if the matter itself is of little consequence, a mere question of chronology or geography, the problem of his attitude to it is correspondingly easy. He need have no hesitation in avowing his entire uncertainty in the premises. On the other hand, if it is a matter fundamental in religious thought, vital for religious experience, the religious man is not likely to be in doubt. Conviction is firmly rooted in experience. If, indeed, doubt should become his settled attitude of mind respecting vital and fundamental matters, it would be necessary for him to discontinue teaching.

But between these extremes there lie a multitude of questions which are so interwoven in the minds of men with the question of vital religion that doubt concerning them is likely to disturb the soil out of which religious experience grows, yet of such a nature historically or scientifically that they can be settled only by a scholarly examination of the evidence that is beyond the reach of many teachers. The problems of this class are constantly shifting. Questions which yesterday were in this class are today recognized as incidental rather than vital to religion. Questions that for one mind belong in one class are for other minds in another. A generation ago the question whether the earth was created in six days was a burning one. A little later discussion centered upon the inquiry whether the days of Genesis, chapter 1, represent correctly the succession of geologic ages recorded in the rocks. Then the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, and the historicity of the book of Jonah, were in the fore-front. For most of our readers these are not today questions of acute interest. They are no longer so entangled with religious experience and conviction that any possible answer to them seems to endanger religion itself.

But other questions have arisen to take the place of these, some in one mind, some in another. To one the question of the genuineness of the Pauline epistles may be of acute interest; to another, the historicity of the records of the supernatural birth of Jesus; to another, the accuracy of the gospels in general; to another, the permanent value of the prophecies of the Old Testament; to another, the infallibility of Jesus as a teacher. To silence every teacher whose mind demands, but cannot yet give, answers to such questions would be to stop the mouths of many of those who are best fitted to teach. What shall the teacher do with such questions?

First, we answer, deal with them frankly in your own mind. If you have not the knowledge with which to answer them, do not attempt to conceal this fact from yourself. Nothing is gained by hiding from oneself one's own mental position.

In the second place, do not, as a rule, press your questions upon younger and less mature minds, but deal honestly with the questions that they raise. Your pupils need your knowledge, and your convictions; they have little need of your ignorance or your perplexity. Do not fear to say, "I do not know," when you cannot honestly give a more positive answer. That the pupil should have confidence in the sincerity of the teacher is of more consequence than that he obtain definite answer to his questions. But do not unnecessarily precipitate difficulties.

In the third place, never be content with merely negative statements. The answer, "I do not know," though it may be necessary, is rarely sufficient. To the confession of ignorance on the point of fact there should always be added as clear a statement as possible of the religious truth which remains equally true whether the vehicle through which it is conveyed is history or poetry.

In the fourth place, it will often be advisable to present the matter just as it is presented in the Bible. The Genesis writer believed that the world was created in six days. It is entirely legitimate, it may often be wise, to present this as his view, and leave untouched the question whether the view is scientifically correct, passing at once to the religious teaching of which the story is for him the medium. The prophet told the story of Ruth as history, employing it to illustrate a religious truth. Tell the story as he told it, expound

the lesson that he saw in it; and pass by, unless the pupil raises it, the question whether the narrative is true as history. Possibly the author himself did not know; very possibly you cannot find out.

This principle applies to many problems. Were the demoniacs possessed by substantively existent evil spirits, or was this the interpretation which men of Jesus' day naturally and inevitably put upon phenomena that today we should classify as nervous disease? There are times and places when this question should be fully and carefully discussed, but that place would rarely be in a class of young boys or girls. The apostle Peter fell asleep and had a vision of a sheet let down from heaven containing all manner of unclean animals. How much of his language is that of experience, how much interpretation of that experience? Can you explain the physics of the occurrence, and draw the line between the physics and the psychic element? The incident had a religious significance, which is unaffected by these questions. It is not wise to obscure this significance by dwelling on those elements of the incident which are independent of it and but slightly related to it.

A fact is clothed in language of poetry. How much is fact, how much is poetry? Yesterday it had not occurred to us to doubt that it was all fact. Today we cannot quite draw the line. Tomorrow possibly we shall be able to do so. Yesterday we taught it unquestioningly as fact. Today we teach the story as it stands, avoiding unnecessary suggestion of doubt concerning its historical character, but avoiding also affirmations of historicity that exceed our clear convictions. Tomorrow perhaps we shall speak with new assurance because with clearer vision.

When the teacher is in doubt, what then? Let him be honest with himself and with his pupil. Let him neither affirm the more stoutly the more he is in doubt, nor hasten to advertise his doubts and precipitate questions where none exist. Let him lay emphasis on the religious and ethical teachings of that which is the subject of study. Let him answer all questions sincerely, fearing not to confess ignorance when that is the real situation; and let him seek always to emphasize the unchanging verities of experimental religion. The cause of true religion needs no bolstering by pretension of knowledge where none exists, or by affirmations of conviction that lack the note of reality.